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AUTHOR McMahon, Tim
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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the policy parameters of establishing distance education networks in New Zealand. The current decentralized educational system is described, including the role of the state through the Ministry of Education, funding and resource allocations, and staffing. Discussion includes the contracting out to third parties for the provision of educational services (curriculum development, teacher professional development, and research); the importance of school-business and/or school-community partnerships; government initiatives in distance education; and government initiatives in information technology. (AEF)

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Establishing Distance Education Networks in New Zealand: Policy Parameters

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Tim McMahon
Senior Manager
Learning and Evaluation Policy
Ministry of Education
New Zealand

Decentralised system

In 1989 the New Zealand education system was reformed. The central bureaucracy was dismantled, and the governance and the management of every school was placed in the hands of its own board of trustees. The logic of the reform rests on the efficiency of decision making being placed closest to where its effects are felt. School communities are the best placed to decide what is best for their children's learning.

The role of the state through the Ministry of Education is that of property owner, policy maker, funder and regulator only. The state lays down curriculum requirements in the form "Schools must ensure that students have the opportunity to achieve the national achievement objectives which are defined in the New Zealand curriculum". School boards are required to ensure that achievement is monitored and reported to the community.

Schools are funded individually to deliver their curriculum responsibilities. The funding is viewed as a purchase arrangement where the government purchases the delivery of the curriculum from schools.

The purchase price, or amount of funding each school gets, depends primarily on its size and roll characteristics. A school's funding comes in two components — an "operations grant" and a teaching salaries component.

Schools get an operations grant from which to pay all bits for services. equipment, maintenance, and so on. The operations grant pays salaries of all non-teaching staff. The operations grant is not :"tagged" in any way — a board of trustees has entire discretion over deciding about, and purchasing from commercial providers, all resources required to support the satisfactory delivery of the curriculum (including computers and software, for example.) The size of a schools operations grant is calculated on a roll-related formula. Inevitably there is perennial discussion between the schools and the government over the adequacy of the operations grant.

Boards select and employ their own teaching staff but have a choice as to the way they wish to receive their teaching salaries resource. A staffing entitlement number is determined by rollrelated formula. Boards may choose to employ the entitlement number of staff and have them paid from the centre, or they may choose instead to have a bulk salaries grant — equivalent to the salary bill of their central staffing entitlement — added to their operations grant, after which they may employ whichever and as many staff, above or below entitlement, as they wish.

Some schools are entitled to additional supplementary funding provided that they meet certain criteria related to particular student needs. For example, some schools receive entitlement funding based on SES equity criteria (TFEA), and there are (contestable) application pools of funding available to schools which meet criteria relating to:

- special education needs (students at risk) Maori language support
- tertiary level programs (secondary-tertiary alignment resource) rural 'disadvantage'.

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Purchase of other outputs on behalf of schools

The Ministry of Education contracts out to third parties for the provision of some services on behalf of schools, for example, curriculum development, teacher professional development, and research.

In a few cases selected schools have been offered contracts to undertake pilot or research and development activities. The CASATECH project, described in the paper, was begun from such an arrangement.

Importance of local initiatives school — Business &/or community partnerships

The government is keen to see the relationship between schools and the business sector grow. Partnerships between schools and business may well have resource benefits for schools, as in the CASATECH case. But equally importantly, successful dialogue between school managers, teachers, and students, and business managers and operators may ultimately benefit students as their education may be more attuned to the business view of the real worlds while the business sector view of schooling may itself be brought up-to-date

An interesting development, in the context of the logic of decentralisation, has been the "cubbing together" of groups of schools to negotiate bulk supply deals with providers of goods and services. Some of these arrangements have been very successful as will be demonstrated later in this paper.

Government Initiatives in Distance Education

There is a long history of traditional distance education in New Zealand. New Zealand's correspondence school was established in 1922 and operated for more than 70 years using snail mail and radio, supplemented by occasional visiting teachers. But distance educators have been innovative and have not been slow to invoke information technologies. Distance education in New Zealand now uses a wide variety of technologies including interactive TV, computer disc mailouts, email and on-line audio-graphic link-ups.

Government Initiatives in IT

Ever since the first "Consultative Committee on Computers in Schools" in 1982, and before the government reform which saw the new Ministry of Education established, the government has kept a cautious watching brief on the impact of information technologies in schools.

We have a long history of exploratory or model programs in which small amounts of funding have been made available to pilot schools to test or stimulate innovative approaches to the use of information technologies. In the latter days of the former Department of Education there was even a Computers in Education Development Unit dedicated to IT in schools.

New Zealand schools traditionally have supplemented any government funding with locally raised funds. Prior to the restructuring of education locally raised funds were the main source of revenue for information technology purchase.

In spite of the lack of direct government input, the rate of uptake of information technologies by schools has been encouraging. Student computer ratios in New Zealand schools compare favourably with most other Western countries.

In 1994 the Ministry's internal information technology system was extended to pilot a "Schools Net" backboned by the government's nationwide payroll network infrastructure. This pilot is moving to Internet protocols with the Ministry maintaining a WWW 'home page". It was always planned that the Schools Net would eventually be "spun off" to private enterprise.

Recently, some schools have been able to supplement operational grants, through R&D contracts with the Ministry, or by successfully bidding for contestable funding.

R&D contract funding enabled the establishment of four "technology development" secondary schools. These schools were to provide models for the implementation of the new Technology as well as leadership in the use of information technologies across the curriculum.

An R&D contract also enabled the Correspondence School recently to embark on a project using interactive TV via both satellite and terrestrial links, mainly for foreign language programs. These programs are to be accessibly urban schools as well as traditional users of distance education because,

in common with many countries, New Zealand has a shortage Of skilled teachers of foreign languages. This technology is, of course, not new for Victoria.

Both R&D contract funding, and successful bids for contestable rural "disadvantage" supplementary funding, have enabled the establishment of a number of regional networks based on audio/video graphic linkups. The CASATECH project was the pioneer of these programs.